

## 1. **The Cirl Bunting Project**

The Cirl Bunting Project is a fantastic example of how the use of sound science and research can allow implementation of practical solutions for a declining species whilst also benefiting farmers.

- **Overview**

The cirl (pronounced *sirl*) bunting is a small finch-like bird which is a close relative of the yellowhammer.

Cirl buntings were once widespread and common across much of southern England, but in recent years, they have become rare and only found in south Devon, mostly confined to coastal farmland between Plymouth and Exeter.

We ran a programme of research to try to understand this decline. We found that the loss of food sources and nesting sites had caused this dramatic decline.

During the winter, cirl buntings forage in weedy stubble fields, feeding on seeds and spilt grain. In the summer, they nest in hedges or scrub, and forage in unimproved grassland full of invertebrates - grasshoppers are a particularly valuable food for chicks.

As cirl buntings are very sedentary (they only move up to 2 km between their breeding and wintering areas), it is vital all these habitats are close to each other.

Changes in agriculture during the 20th century have made farms more productive, but these changes have meant cirl buntings have struggled to find food and nesting sites.

Technological advances such as autumn-sown cereals replacing spring-sown varieties, more efficient machinery resulting in less spilt grain, increased fertiliser and pesticide use and hedge removal to create larger fields have all had an impact.

A widespread trend towards specialised farms has seen farms in the west of the country converting to mainly grass and farms in the east growing arable crops. This has resulted in a reduction of mixed farms, which makes life very difficult for a species like the cirl bunting which needs both grass and arable habitats close to each other.

In Devon, small traditionally-managed coastal farms have persisted, the exposed coastal environment making spring crops a more viable option than winter cropping. This has made this area more appealing to cirl buntings.

A mixed farming environment that includes winter stubbles is the key to helping this colourful bird and the support of the farming community is vital if cirl buntings are to become more secure in the UK.

- **Objectives**

- To reach 1,000 pairs of cirl buntings by 2020 or sooner and a population which is stable or increasing - met target number of pairs by 2016.
- To offer advice and support to landowners within the birds' current range and to promote sympathetic land management for the cirl bunting.
- To develop a network of sympathetically-managed sites throughout the cirl buntings' current range.
- To work with Natural England, local authorities and developers to ensure that the impacts of development are minimised and offset.
- To establish a self-sustaining geographically separate population (see our reintroduction project page).

- **Progress**

- During the past 25 years, through the provision of RSPB advice, support from agri-environment funding and the enthusiastic response from farmers, the cirl bunting population has increased 9 fold. However, this species remains vulnerable in the UK, particularly from development pressure and uncertainty around the future of agri-environment funding. It remains on the red list because of the widespread range contraction.
- 1988: The RSPB began research into cirl bunting ecology and the reasons behind their decline.
- 1989: The RSPB and Devon Birdwatching and Preservation Society undertook a cirl bunting survey, which began to highlight the issues of a severe decline. There were just 118 pairs left in the UK, mainly confined to Devon.
- 1992: The Countryside Stewardship Scheme (a Government-funded agri-environment scheme) introduced a cirl bunting 'special project' option for farmers to provide low input spring barley crops which, after harvest, were left as weedy stubbles until the end

of March, so providing important sources of winter seed food. This particular cropping option was recommended by the RSPB on the basis of its scientific findings and targeted in the right places on farms within the cirl bunting's range, providing a lifeline for them (and other farmland birds) over winter.

- 1993: The RSPB employed a cirl bunting project officer to work with farmers and landowners to encourage suitable habitat provision for the birds.
- 1997: Research began to look into the feasibility of possible sites for a cirl bunting reintroduction programme.
- 1998: The RSPB national cirl bunting survey recorded 450 pairs, which were still mainly restricted to south Devon.
- 2003: The RSPB/English Nature Defra-funded national cirl bunting survey recorded a population of 697 pairs.
- 2004: Cirl bunting reintroduction trials started.
- 2005: The Countryside Stewardship Scheme was replaced by Environmental Stewardship.
- 2006: The cirl bunting reintroduction programme began.
- 2007: The first breeding cirl buntings in Cornwall for over a decade were confirmed.
- 2008: The RSPB bought land in Labrador Bay in Devon to make the UK's only cirl bunting nature reserve.
- 2009: The National Cirl Bunting Survey (RSPB/Natural England) recorded 862 territories with some range expansion.
- 2011: The last cirl bunting chicks were released into Cornwall as part of the reintroduction project.
- 2014: After 10 years of habitat management, it was confirmed that cirl buntings were breeding at RSPB Powderham Marshes in Devon.
- 2015: There were more than 50 breeding pairs in Cornwall.
- 2016: A milestone of over 1,000 pairs reached.
- 2017: Planning guidance for cirl buntings and developments developed and used by Devon County Council, Teignbridge District Council and Torbay Council. Purchase of Ashill through developer contributions.

- **Planned Work**

Our vision for the future of cirl buntings is to ensure that by 2020 or sooner, the population of this species will be stable or increasing beyond 1,000 pairs and not be subject to significant risk. The Cornish reintroduced population will continue to increase and expand its range.

We will continue to work with and extend our network of wildlife-friendly farmers and other landowners across Devon and Cornwall.

We will provide advice on sympathetic land management and guidance and support around the new agri-environment schemes to help cirl buntings as well as other threatened species.

We will develop our work to trial 10 cirl bunting core areas. These are areas which already support high breeding numbers but by increasing our engagement with local communities, we hope to encourage them to take greater ownership of this species and ultimately achieve better breeding productivity and range expansion from these areas.

One of these sites is the RSPB Labrador Bay nature reserve which holds more than 20 pairs of cirl buntings and is a great site to demonstrate good habitat management.

The threat from built development is an increasing concern, particularly to the north and west of the cirl buntings' range, where the population is concentrated on the urban fringes of places such as Teignmouth and Dawlish.

We continue to work with local authorities and developers to ensure the impacts of development are minimised, including providing suitable alternative habitat when the birds' original habitat is lost. The RSPB will enhance and manage the farmland habitats at our new nature reserve at Ashill so that cirl bunting numbers will increase there, as they have done at our Labrador Bay reserve.

- **Results**

There has been an astonishing 800 per cent increase in the cirl bunting population since the RSPB Cirl Bunting Project began.

The Cirl Bunting Project is widely recognised as a model of how farmers can work in a way that is productive for them but which also helps wildlife. This is backed up by RSPB science.

In 2009, 54 per cent of the cirl bunting population was recorded on land managed through an agri-environment scheme (the Countryside Stewardship Scheme or Higher Level Stewardship), and 95 per cent of the cirl bunting population is within 2 km of land managed through agri-environment agreements.

During the last 10 years the project has directly influenced management of over 100 square kilometres of land.

There is now a self-sustaining reintroduced population in Cornwall.

A wide variety of other threatened species are benefiting from the management that is happening for cirl buntings – these include other seed-eating birds such as linnets and skylarks, plus brown hares, rare arable plants, greater and lesser horseshoe bats, grey long-eared bats and flowering plants in species-rich grasslands.

- **Partners**

- [Natural England](#)
- Devon and Cornwall Farming Community